

## Savlanut — Patience

*When something bad happens to you and you did not have the power to avoid it, do not aggravate the situation even more through wasted grief.<sup>1</sup>*

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The *middah* of *savlanut* engages us at a different level than the *middot* of *seder* or *menuchah ha-nefesh*, though it presupposes our previous engagement with both of those *middot*. *Seder* and *menuchah ha-nefesh* shape our soul. *Seder* by allowing us to make room for the other and *menuchah ha-nefesh* by allowing the other to fill the space that *seder* makes such that the truth of our soul is revealed to us. *Savlanut* addresses what we might call the adventure of the soul moving into the world. This soul, which has taken root within us, is interminably vulnerable. It will encounter, no let's not speak abstractly here, we will encounter impediments to the soul's desire for fulfillment at every turn. These encounters are the source of pain and suffering in our lives. There is much here to explore. Let me explain how we will approach the subject of *savlanut* in this context. We will review the reasons for the soul's vulnerability. We will explore what we mean by its desire for fulfillment. We will discuss the various layers of impediments that it encounters and out of this discussion we will try to fashion an understanding of how *savlanut* functions in our everyday lives.

However, as a preliminary, it is important to know that the root of the word *savlanut* in Hebrew is the word for suffering. Thus *savlanut* should be translated more accurately as “sufferance.” Sufferance and patience are close in meaning to one another, but recognizing the link between suffering, sufferance and patience will help us understand the full range of meanings of this *middah*. It recognizes the fact that at every level suffering or pain is present in human consciousness and must be taken into account in understanding human behavior. In fact, at the very birth of the soul, so to speak, not unlike the very experience of physical birth, pain and suffering are present. While we have spoken of the contraction of the self in order to make room for the other as the revelation of the soul, we have spoken as if this were somehow a benign movement. It is not. The revelation of our soul emerges out of a cauldron of violence not dissimilar to the

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Mendel of Satanov. (1845). *Chesbon ha-Nefesh*. (D. Landesman, trans.) Feldheim Publishers, New York, 1995. Pages 108-115.

thunder, lightening and quaking that are described as accompanying the moment at Sinai, or more picturesquely described in the Rabbinic *midrash* of the mountain being suspended by a thread over the heads of the people Israel. Similarly, the kabbalistic idea of *tzimzum*, is not far removed from the kabbalistic idea of *shevarei ha-kelim*, the breaking of the vessels intended to hold the emanation of the godhead. That is to say, violence, pain and suffering are an intrinsic part of the experience of the world. *Savlanut* both recognizes this fact and helps to guide us in the face of this fact. The ability to cultivate patience or sufferance in the face of the smallest inconveniences of life is connected to a much larger and deeper level of spiritual accomplishment.

So we return to our list of questions. What is the source of the soul's vulnerability? Obviously, it is the other! The other (the future) is unpredictable. The other is as potentially as mired in the grip of his or her *yetzer hara* as we (the self) are (is.) From the perspective of the self that does not disappear in the transformation into a soul, the other, part of its own soul, is always a potential threat. Only at the level of *hasidut*, which we are not addressing in these *shiurim* is it possible to speak about transcending this existential reality. (And so we will not discuss here how that is possible – have patience; we have years of study ahead of us.) Thus, *savlanut* requires that we experience this threat and nonetheless agree to suffer it. We will return to this. Let's continue with our questions. What do we mean by the soul's desire for fulfillment? To put it simply, the soul's desire for fulfillment is its desire to eliminate the threat to it. However, this desire operates on two levels (minimally!) On the level of *kibbush* it desires to minimize the pain implicit in the encounter with the other. On the level of *tikkun* it desires to transform that pain into pleasure on behalf of the other (this returns us to the subject of *hasidut* which we are not speaking about.)

Finally, our last question: What are the various layers of impediments that trigger this defense mechanism resulting in impatience, which, in the end, is the futile refusal to recognize and deal with suffering? It is in answering this question that we arrive at the everyday choices between patience and impatience. We may be confronted, on the one hand, with a situation as trivial as waiting in line at the supermarket or as serious as waiting for a loved one (or for ourselves) to recover from a life threatening illness, whether such recovery is expected or not. In either situation if we are not prepared for the

inevitability of suffering we rebel. This rebellion is characterized by *Heshbon Ha-Nefesh* as “wasted grief.” This term is suggestive. Grief is our innate response to suffering. It is a process by which we recognize the inevitability of suffering and loss and come to terms with it. When grief is considered wasted is precisely when it does not lead to acceptance and reconciliation; when it can’t lead to reconciliation because there has been no acceptance. Worse still, of course, since wasted grief is an act of rebellion, it precipitates further impatience, which, in turn, precipitates more wasted grief and the harm that we do to others by refusing to reconcile ourselves to the inevitable pain that being in relationship with them, even the most fleeting relationship, continues to grow. Every human interaction is a potential threat to our self from the perspective of our *Yetzer Hara*. But every human interaction is also an opportunity to suffer the birth pangs of the soul. The difference between rebelling against the threat to us and suffering the ongoing birth pangs of our soul is the difference between patience and impatience.

We have often spoken about the fact that every moment presents us with a choice between the *Yetzer Hara* and the *Yetzer Hatov*. We have further explained that this choice is a choice between the self and the other. We can now begin to understand more clearly how our middah work creates the practical pathway by which we become aware of the choices before us and endeavor to make them. In particular we have seen that the *middah of seder* helps us garner the energy that we need to bear the burden of the other; how the *middah of menuchat ha-nefesh* helps us to transform our self into a soul by virtue of contracting to make a (metaphorical) place for the other within ourselves, and how this in turn engenders an inevitable suffering that we learn to suffer and eventually will learn to transform from suffering into joy.

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The meaning of *savlanut* as sufferance is a derivation from the earlier and deeper meaning of its Hebrew root: to bear a burden. In that sense it is the *middah* par excellence since at all times it serves as a reminder of our obligation to bear the burden of the other. It is therefore, also, the most common and most difficult *middah*. It is the most difficult particularly because without *savlanut* we can not begin to address ourselves to the rest of the *middot* to come. As we have already said, lack of *savlanut* is the result of a rebellion of the self against the contraction that accompanies the birth of the soul. It is precisely the

threat of the other in his or her presenting him or herself as *a burden to bear* that is so threatening. Every other is not only a potential burden to bear, but an actual burden to bear. Yet every other is also an essential component in the formation of our own soul. The extent to which we can *suffer* the pain of contracting the self to bear the burden of the other even in the face of the rebellion of the self is the measure that we can use to gauge the progress we make in rediscovering the soul potential in every one of us. It is the fact that our soul is in constant formation, as we will explain below, that *savlanut* is also the most commonly encountered *middah*.

Imagine this as a process that is always at hand. We walk into the supermarket and in our rush to finish our shopping we find ourselves in a long line made longer by the difficulty someone is having reading the price on a particular item, or by the fact that the card reader is working slowly and someone is having difficulty paying. In each of those cases we are presented with another person who in that very moment has a burden, perhaps many burdens. That person's burden attempts to enter into our consciousness. Is there room for it? Not if we listen to the fearful advice of our self (here we can certainly name that self as *Yetzer HaRa*.) The incursion of this person *as a burden* into our consciousness presents us with the opportunity to contract the screaming self and enlarge our soul or to give the self full reign all but eliminating the soul in that moment. This is the choice that we have often spoken about in *mussar*. In this analysis we also come to understand that the soul is not a static entity. It is constantly expanding and contracting depending on our ability to either cultivate our *middot* or not.

This then raises some questions regarding the soul itself. If we understand that it is a continually expanding or contracting entity and we recognize the difficulties, the pain that is involved in its expansion over against the self we need to explore what our resources are in trying over and over to expand it. In other words, what is our motivation? In other contexts we have spoken about the essential role that joy plays in *mussar* theory and practice. In the context of discussing the pain that accompanies the creation of a soul we might conclude that at every moment, faced with this soul-expanding choice, our lives are a constant experience of pain. In fact, there are those who have understood *mussar* in this way and on account of this understanding there are many who would turn away from

*mussar*. It is therefore very important that in light of our analysis we explore the source of joy inherent in the creation of the soul, a joy even in the face of pain.

Rav Simcha Zissel of Kelm, one of the primary students of Rav Israel Salanter, the founder of the modern *mussar* movement taught in his *magnum opus: Hochma U'Mussar* the following on this question.

A well known saying of the wise: ‘pain and joy are interlaced with one another’ – that is, after pain will come joy and the joy will be much greater than if one hadn’t experienced the pain before the joy.

Rav Simcha goes on to explicate this saying with reference to the sapphire brick work that Moses and the elders of Israel saw beneath the throne God. He explains that this brickwork was composed of the pain of the people Israel, concluding that God, literally, sees the world only through the pain of Israel. He goes on to say:

And now : ‘When they saw as it were the heavens for clearness,’ they were already redeemed. Why did the Torah need to add the phrase ‘a pavement of sapphire’ as a memorial to the pain of Israel? Only, it would seem, so to speak, that God had before them the pavement of sapphire in contrast to the very heavens for clearness to raise, as it were, the joy in contrast to this.

Rav Simcha draws the conclusion that the Torah includes the reference to the pavement of sapphire, which he defines as being made up of the pain of Israel, in order to teach Moses and the elders that only by virtue of the pain they have sustained can they experience and appreciate the joy that the clearness of heaven presupposes. If we translate this into the language of our *mussar* work we can say that Rav Simcha teaches us the following things. First, that it is what we might call the reality of existence that pain and joy are interlaced. Pain does not exist absent joy and joy does not exist absent pain. Second, that what our tradition conceives of as the “Divine view” of the world is none other than the world viewed through the pain and suffering of others, that God, as it were, God’s self can only “see” the world through bearing its burden of pain. Third, and this is the crucial learning, that the more pain we bear the more joy is released. How so? We remember that the *Yetzer HaTov* is not external to our being. Though it may be overcome by the power of the *Yetzer HaRa*, when the self is constricted to allow for the bearing of the burden of the other the space that is created into which the other is taken is not empty! It is precisely the “space” of the *Yetzer HaTov*. Rav Simcha discovers this

through the idea of the “clearness of heaven” that constitutes the Divine view that transcends the sapphire brickwork. We discover this in the experience of bearing the burden of the other. Whether it is while waiting for the check-out person to finish someone else’s order or waiting for the card-reader to be fixed, after and sometimes simultaneous with the pain of the constricting self we experience the joy of the now expanding *Yetzer HaTov* as it welcomes the other into its space. There is no good vocabulary to name this experience, but joy, sometimes small and sometimes great, is an experience that we are all at least a little familiar with when we indeed allow ourselves to put the self on hold even for a moment. This joy is fragile, but motivational. The more often we experience it, the more we recognize its presence or its potential presence in every moment, the less difficult it becomes to suffer the pain of the *Yetzer HaRa* in anticipation of experiencing the joy of the *Yetzer HaTov*.